

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Body Image

The sculptures and installations of Anthea Hamilton stage the complexities of interpretation and desire



Dance, 2006, mixed media, 146 x 40 x 10 cm. All images courtesy: IBID PROJECTS, London.

How to distill desire? One: take the scene from Merchant Ivory's 1985 film *A Room with a View* in which Julian Sands, too quick to be stopped, kisses Helena Bonham-Carter on a Tuscan hillside, the moment sent skyward by a Puccini soundtrack. Two: edit that compressed ardency further to a handful of stills: her entrance amidst the thigh-high grass, her sighting of him, the consequential kiss. Three: turn those stills into transparencies and tuck them into a splayed pair of women's legs laser-cut from transparent acrylic, swung open with a brass hinge and functioning as both provisional representations and legs on a functional-looking stool, at once the bar furniture of British Pop artist Allan Jones's dreams and an enigma, almost a mirage. Presto: *Leg Chair (Room with a View)* (2009).

There are at least three dimensions of implied avidity here. One romantically elevated, one rudimentarily biological and one glitteringly intellectual, the latter recalling that conflation of speculative thought and Eros articulated by Roland Barthes, most explicitly in *A Lover's Discourse* (1979). There's the invitation to rationalize this smash-cut between classy and crude dimensions of need, first of all, but also a host of second-order opacities. Why a woman's legs as a chair, and the obvious corollary: in what hybrid space do Jones and buttoned-up costume drama co-exist? What's the ontological status of these stagey limbs, given that their flattened see-through silhouettes are at least two steps removed from reality, compared to the reality of a photograph of a film based on a novel: how to parse the

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THOMAS DANE GALLERY

hierarchy? And then there's the vexation of function. Is this chair to be sat on, or looked at? Those transparencies are inserted loosely, almost haphazardly, between a double layer of acrylic, and your explanations of *Leg Chair* are likely to feel as makeshift as that compositional decision, whose deliberated instability is a Hamilton signature. The thinking, a response to an intricacy of divergent cues, is all but involuntary.



Luke Perry, 2009, Paper, plaster and a cauliflower cast in dyed wax, 75 x 22 x 16 cm.

Leg Chair is a good place to begin a discussion about the London-based artist's work, being a compact model of how she coaxes a proliferation of connotation. Its inferences stack up but its moving parts are few – as with, say, *Luke Perry* (2009), in which a tattered poster of the former *Beverly Hills 90210* star is supported on a plaster column, held in place (tentatively, again) by a black wax cast of a cauliflower that, due to the exquisite-corpse manner in which the poster is folded, suggests Perry's exposed brain. He looks askance, blissfully unaware, the angle of his gaze an invisible vector in the work. To posit the latter feels like a reach, but it's precisely these kinds of quiet formal nuances on which Hamilton's art often turns, and which have proliferated wildly in her larger assemblies and installations.

For *Gymnasium*, an expansive, punchy, semi-improvised installation that was commissioned by London's Chisenhale Gallery in 2008, Hamilton effectively activated every coordinate of the venue. Red crash-mats thrummed brightly on the floor; geometric gold designs, resembling both architectural ornament and schematic muscled arms, cartwheeled around the walls. Elsewhere, a scattered diversity of bodily cues: lone women's shoes, more cut-outs of legs (these, modelled on Hamilton's own and a recurring motif in her work since 2006, offer fragmentary proxies for a viewer gingerly traversing her precarious propositions) and, dangling loosely from the ceiling like a sporty Eva Hesse, a football practice net. If a gymnasium is a place for working out (in Europe the word tends to mean not just sports facility but school; in the original Greek context, however, so the exhibition's publicity pointed out, it denoted 'a place to be naked'), then elements such as the

net reflexively espoused an idea of multiple attempts at cognitive exercise. Unravelling Hamilton's show was implicitly associated with reaching a goal – or at least kicking repeatedly at a target.

Not that this was a cryptogram, more an invitation to experience the erotics of thought as foregrounded. To deal with, say, how the show's tilt towards an image repertoire pointing at the (absent or abstracted) body was deliberately counterweighted at every turn by sprung formalism – cat's-cradle geometries of string running from ceiling to floor, for example – while any aspect that looked like it might be an invitation to actually interact was offset by something emphatically aesthetic, such as a wall painted chromakey blue. *Gymnasium* offered a tiered dynamic system in which physical and temporal scales, too, were wildly varied. The registers of representation ran between space-traversing linear abstraction that took the eye time to travel, and compact, comprehensible found objects; elsewhere, transient foodstuffs lined up alongside inviolable plastic. And if one responded to the work's demand for upgraded haptic awareness, materiality's many particulars weltered generously forth in systemic contrast.

Turnhalle (Gymnasium, 2009), at the Kunstverein Freiburg in Germany, found Hamilton finessing her pursuit of nervy equipose with specific attention to functionality-as-tease. The installation was primarily structured as a spacious orchestration of exercise machines, gesturing towards actual use (underlined by big reproductions on the

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

walls of a woman working out) but also bespeaking a kind of self-conscious machine fetishism. The installation also contained rogue non-functional elements such as wax barbells; a semi-rationale was thus offered – why is there workout gear in a gallery? you can use it! – only to be undercut. (Though not, apparently, before a few wax sculptures were pawed and broken by visitors assuming that everything in the show invited interaction.) The giant exercising woman, one might have discerned, operated also to equilibrate the rigorous, columnar masculinity, beautiful but oppressive, of the building's 1930s fascist architecture. Nothing in *Turnhalle* served just one purpose; everything was situational.

This kind of implicit balance has pervaded Hamilton's work since the outset. Her solo debut, held at London's ibid projects in 2006 following her graduation from the Royal College of Art the previous year, was entitled 'Athens' for the multivalent associations of the word, for how its potential plenitude might turn into near-emptiness: classical learning, a package holiday the rough-and-tumble contemporary city, a patterned pot, the Olympics. Tying together its aspects with a tiled chequerboard floor and the title's at once specific and open-ended tone, 'Athens' featured, among other things, *Untitled (Odile)* (2006), a suspended sculpture involving horizontal poles strung on lengths of rope, from which dangled an irregular but perfectly weighted handful of snooker balls and marbles: a cross between a dreamcatcher, a child's mobile, a piece of gymnast's equipment and an outlandish ship's mast.

Hamilton's characteristically catholic influences here, she says, were two films: John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956) and Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (1972). Signifiers floated freely, bumping into each other; watching them do so, rather than waiting for resolution, felt like the point. To quote from Susan Sontag's 1962 essay 'Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition', a valuable text for Hamilton: 'The Happening operates by creating an asymmetrical network of surprises, without climax or consummation [...] what is primary in a Happening is materials – and their modulation as hard and soft, dirty and clean.'¹ That was 'Athens'; that was Gymnasium. Even Hamilton's delving into an aspect of the art culture of a half-century ago feels of a piece with her gaming pragmatism, her fairly amoral yen for contagious intensities.

Film and theatre haunt Hamilton's art works, which frequently have an expectant air of being accoutrements or environments for unspecified narratives and which develop across space rather than time. Indeed, although its title and aspects of its composition come from a 1916 painting by Henri Matisse, *The Piano Lesson* (2007) began life as a group of props for Hamilton's own filmic remake of a scene from an existing film. (The sculpture, she says, rendered her remake unnecessary.) A woody tableau anchored on a black and white striped rectangle, it's a cavalcade of pan-historical prompts: a wavering wooden silhouette taken from the hair of a woman in a Fernand Léger painting, isolated and upright and oversized so that it keeps turning into a body; a Max Ernst-ish (or generally surrealist) croissant moon; a freestanding crossed box that nods, says the artist, to the perspectival devices of Fra Angelico; a fanning arrangement of bamboo poles (a nod to the weird wedge obscuring the boy's eye in the Matisse canvas); and, of course, a cut-out pair of wooden legs, their high-stepping pose suggestive of ancient Egyptian or ancient Assyrian imagery.

The latter objects/images are held together with g-clamps, another advertisement for temporariness. Walk around *The Piano Lesson* and you realize it's all front; from a sidelong vantage, the piece collapses entirely, goes dead. Indeed, it's arguable that this is what Hamilton's work is per se, a sequence of façades or fictions that publicise their own potential undoing, their rejection of inbuilt content or narrative, knowingly so, and that explicitly hitch the pleasures of exploratory thinking to evocations of more bodily pleasures, or use the latter to stimulate the former. It's notable that in her 'Manblind' series (2009–ongoing) she's appropriated photographs of male models and turned them into slatted blinds – it's a way of penetrating the impregnable sense of self these figures exude, but only a gesturing towards it: the men remain somehow impervious, the dividing act and the divided subject refusing to pull together. The untouchable male figure, meanwhile, is set to return in Hamilton's currently gestating body of work, which involves film, installations as sets, a plan to recreate *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) in the same eight-month time-frame that it took John Travolta to learn the dance routine for the Bee Gees' 'You Should Be Dancing' (1976), and – somehow – a conflation of disco culture with the equally overdetermined iconography of Venice.

But then, Hamilton can handle fulsome disjunction. In several recent vitrined works, scalar and tonal imbalances engender tragicomic sparks: in the most successful, *Moe/Chess (Upper and Lower)* (2009), a crumpled memorabilia mask of Moe, the bartender from *The Simpsons*, looks grumpily outward, head on a mirrored cube, while on top of

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

the glass box above him sport various plangent Murano glass animals on a glass-tile chequerboard, much smaller in scale; Moe is a disgruntled, decapitated giant, and – like photos of fictional characters in context with plastic legs, perhaps – realer than they are. Is he a dreaming deity, determining their moves? The uncanny thing about Moe/Chess is that one can enjoy reading it while knowing that doing so is just an exercise: it doesn't have a core purpose other than the bodying forth of unlikely affects.

And this feels like the territory that Hamilton has cornered: the absolute contingency that underpins interpretation, the potential nausea attending the emptiness of things, lit up with pleasure. Here's a resonant word for a title; here's a pattern that might tie some things together; here's the human body we can't help but respond to, always. At the same time, be aware that potentially, none of this means anything – nothing either good or bad. It's like this now, attractively so; it could fall apart tomorrow, or in a second. In 2009's *E.T. Headphones (Viva Italia!)* – Florence to Venice, there's a lot of Italy in Hamilton's art, but the fantasia of Italy is just another nudge, another aroma – an endearing little model of Steven Spielberg's hydrocephalic alien rides a vitrine containing an ersatz Italian flag made from layers of green and pink satin and white fur. Comically giant headphones are clamped over E.T.'s extraterrestrial ears. Half of me wonders what he's listening to – his face is responsive, excited – and half of me knows that it's nothing at all.

1 Susan Sontag, 'Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition', 1963, reprinted in *Against Interpretation*, 1966, Anchor Books, p.266–7

Anthea Hamilton lives and works in London, UK. She had solo exhibitions at the Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany, La Salle de bans, Lyon, France and Ibid Projects, London, UK in 2009. Her work was included in the group show 'Savage Messiah' at Rob Tufnell at Sutton Lane, London earlier this year. Hamilton's forthcoming solo exhibition opens at ibid projects, London, in July.

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